Not Dying from Disease: A Narrative Analysis of HIV/AIDS in the Film *Rent*

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Abstract. Set when AIDS was the scourge of New York City the film adaptation of *Rent* follows the lives of eight characters struggling to live their lives in the early 1990s; four of whom are HIV positive or have AIDS. This research utilizes narrative criticism to analyze the characters’ stories as they manage the physical and emotional consequences of AIDS. The platonic and romantic relationships among the characters act as the catalysts for personal growth, encouraging the characters to live their lives fully within the context of AIDS. The rock opera unfolds to reveal how Angel, Collins, Mimi, and Roger individually cope with the virus. Evaluation of the characters experience resulted in the creation of the HIV/AIDS Lifestyle Integration Continuum.

1. Introduction

The rhetorical artifact of *Rent* was chosen because it is a unique piece popular culture that addresses the theme of HIV/AIDS and serves as a social commentary for its time. Narrative criticism is used to analyze the “meaningful discursive structures” [1] in the film adaptation of the rock opera, *Rent*. Specifically, focusing on how the characters living with HIV/AIDS. “Narratives organize the stimuli of our experience so that we can make sense of the people, places, events, and actions of our lives” [2]. The characters Angel, Collins, Roger, and Mimi supported by their friends Mark, Maureen, Joanne, and Benny build relationships that serve as catalysts for personal growth.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Research Questions

- RQ1: How is HIV/AIDS represented in the narrative of Rent?
- RQ2: How do the individuals cope with having the HIV/AIDS virus?

Methodology

Data was gathered over a one-month period and multiple viewings of the film. Data collection consisted of comprehensive note taking to determine parts vital to narration and specific dialogue concerning HIV/AIDS. The film was broken down into 10 events integral to understanding the discourse surrounding Roger, Mimi, Collins, and Angel’s experience with HIV/AIDS.

Results, Discussion, and Significance

Addressing the first research question, the theme of HIV/AIDS is woven throughout the film. Character representations act to humanize the virus, allowing the audience to create a shared experience – connecting faces, names, and stories to HIV/AIDS. Additionally the characters living with HIV/AIDS are of different ethnicities and sexual orientation. Realistic characters with complex emotions facilitate the audience’s ability to relate the characters and their experiences to their own life. This strategy relays the message that any one may become infected with the virus no matter their race or orientation. Integration of Life Support meetings also allows the audience insight to a more sensitive side of living with HIV/AIDS. Two important themes from the Life Support meetings include the fear of losing one’s dignity to the virus represented in the song, *Will I?* More importantly Life Support meetings introduce the mantra for the film, “no day but today,” which encourages the idea of living one’s life to it’s full extent according to what drives their happiness.

The second research question reveals that each of the characters is in a different stage of their HIV/AIDS experience. Their individual experiences are represented on the Lifestyle Integration Continuum below. The continuum has three benchmarks moving from left to right, un-integrated, integrated, and external integration. To be un-integrated is to exhibit little regard for the virus and the lifestyle changes it demands i.e. drug use, or disclosure.
to potential partners. To be integrated is have a sense of normalcy, or homeostasis. A person who is integrated has a full acceptance of the virus and takes steps to secure their physical and mental health. External integration moves beyond internal integration to self-actualized, this person also helps others begin the process to become internally integrated. The chart below illustrates the characters standing on the continuum at the end of the film.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Un-integrated</th>
<th>Integrated</th>
<th>External Integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mimi</td>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>Collins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Mimi is the least conscious of her HIV/AIDS status, illustrated by her continued drug use and disregard for her health, placing her at the lowest end of the Lifestyle Integration Continuum at un-integrated. For example, Mimi invites Roger to do drugs with her when the two first meet. Roger hovers between un-integrated and integrated on the continuum because he has taken steps to better his life by abandoning his drug habits, but he still struggles accepting his HIV/AIDS, and the loss of his girlfriend. Collins represents homeostasis or normalcy, placing him at integrated on the Lifestyle Integration Continuum; he exudes optimism while personally dealing with HIV/AIDS. Angel is the most open about his HIV/AIDS status. He is in the final stages of the virus; he secures his mental well being by attending Life Support regularly and encourages others to join him drawing them toward internal integration. At different times Collins, Mimi, and Roger all attended Life Support at the request of Angel, he represents the far right end of the continuum, external integration.

3. Conclusions

The story of *Rent* gives unique insight into the human experience of those living with HIV/AIDS. Character creation is an effective way to humanize HIV/AIDS and to deliver social commentary. Additionally the variety of characters allows for widespread relatability, it also shows the different journeys characters take to HIV/AIDS lifestyle integration. However, the rock opera has two major limitations. First the story does not reveal how each character was infected, without that information the audience will assume that both Roger and Mimi were infected by drug use, while being sexually active in the gay community infected Angel and Collins. These are the two most common ways one may become infected, but it excludes those who were infected by blood transfusions or other circumstances. This research also found that the upbeat melodies at times glorify drug use and/or degrade the seriousness of HIV/AIDS if not interpreted in the context of living one’s life to the full extent. One will also find the two songs that are sung during Life Support meetings are slower and more somber.

4. Acknowledgements

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References
